

MIDLIFE –XI
MOVING TOWARD INTEGRITY

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this edition, I present another midlife challenge: achieving integrity--*that is ability look back over one's life without regrets and look forward to death without fear.*

Sr. Felicia is in her late 80's. She is physically frail and bedridden because of a debilitating illness. But her mind is sharp as it was in her twenties when she first came to India as a young missionary. She radiates joy and enjoys telling stories to her visitors – stories of her experiences. “When I first came to India...” she would begin and go on a narrative of her missionary adventures. She would often repeat the same story. Those who have heard her many times, would tell her. “Sister, we have heard that one before. Tell us another.” She would then say, “This I think I have not told you.” And then start something different, but invariably after a while her narrative would go back to the oft repeated stories.

What Sr. Felicia is doing is reminiscing and integrating. In retelling her experiences she brings the bits and pieces of her long life into perspective and endows them with meaning.

In Erikson's eight-stage developmental scheme, the crucial task of the eighth and last stage is achievement of integrity. The word, as Erikson uses it, does not refer to honesty or authenticity, but to wholeness, in the way The Oxford English Dictionary defines it: “Wholeness, entireness, completeness... the condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting.” Integrity consists in seeing one's life in its entirety as meaningful and worthwhile. It is the result of synthesising a life time of experiences, both good and bad, in a way that enables one “to look back over life without regrets and to look forward to death without fear.” Such a stance calls for much soul-searching for the meaning of our life and working through and coming to terms with life's inevitable disappointments and tragedies, as well as being thankful for its blessings.

Reminiscence

The central process that leads to integrity is reminiscence, the repeated nostalgic contemplation and retelling of our life stories. As our life experiences are remembered and retold again and again, a synthesis and integration occurs. The scattered pieces of the puzzle that is our life begins to fall into shape. We begin to see our life in its entirety and accept everything, finding meaning and purpose even in what was considered senseless or tragic.

Often during reminiscence memories of unresolved issues come into awareness with an invitation to reconcile with them.

Another important aspect of this reminiscence is the evaluation of our contributions to improve the quality of life for others.

Psychologist Robert Butler describes what happens in the reminiscence:

As the past marches in review, it is surveyed, observed, and reflected upon by the ego.

Reconsideration of previous experiences and their meanings occurs, often with concomitant revised or expanded understanding. Such reorganization of past experience may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meaning to one's life; it may also prepare one for death, mitigating one's fears. (*The Life Review*, pp. 489-490)

Altruism and Generativity

Those who have been generative, through contributions to culture and society, rather than focused on personal aggrandisement and ego gratification in their earlier years, are the ones who find it easier to move toward integrity. Through these generative and altruistic activities they are able, in psychologist Robert Peck's words, to "achieve enduring significance" and so be in a better frame of mind to accept the impending end. The efforts made to make life more secure, more meaningful, or happier for the people who will go on after one dies is one of the most important dynamics that enables one to look back without regrets and forward without fear.

Relationships

The close relationships one has enjoyed also provide for a sense of subjective-wellbeing and satisfaction, and thereby enhances the path toward integrity. This is all the more true if the close relationships are still maintained.

Maintenance of close, satisfying relationships serves as buffer against the depression and low morale that can ensue from the social deprivations and the physical challenges (deterioration of certain physical capacities, particularly the loss of hearing, impaired vision, and limited motor agility,) that are part and parcel of old age.

Despair

The opposite of integrity is despair – the feeling that one's life was worthless or meaningless, that one had failed to make any contribution to the future of society and wellbeing of others and that it is now too late to make a difference.

This happens especially to those who have lived a very self-centred and selfish life with little regard for the welfare of others. They would now want to make some changes, but there is no time; it is too late. As Erikson observed "Despair expresses the feeling that the time is now short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity" (*Childhood and Society*, p. 269)

According to Robert Butler among those for whom the life review is likely to lead to feeling of despair are those who tended to focus on the future rather than on the present. These had invested heavily in the future, hoping for a rich harvest. But that future never arrived, leading to disillusionment with self and life itself.

Another group that is bound to despair consists of those who deliberately went about injuring others. They are plagued by guilt, but cannot imagine forgiveness and redemption.

Still another group consists of those who have been "characterologically arrogant and prideful," prone to indulge in "narcissistic self-promotion and derisive dismissal of others" (*The Life Review*, p. 491).

Unable to accept as ultimate the life cycle drawing to a close, the despairing individual approaches death with fear and disappointment. Evaluating his or her life and accomplishments, the despairing individual feels that life, instead of being a meaningful adventure, has been wasted. The result is bitterness and resentment. The individual wants to achieve something meaningful, but recognise the futility of trying,

because there is no time left and death is inevitable and near. Despair arises from this sense of waste and futility: ‘If only I could have...’

This haunting sense of despair is poignantly illustrated in the life of Warren Schmidt, the lead character in the film *About Schmidt*. Schmidt had devoted himself totally to advancing his career, neglected his family and had little social connections. After retirement his life goes into downward spiral. His wife dies; his attempt to re-connect with his alienated only daughter is rebuffed. He finds himself totally alone, wanting to connect but not knowing how. He sets off on a long journey in his RV (motor home) alone, revisiting his past, and as he makes an evaluation of his life on that solitary journey, he reaches a sad conclusion: “My life has been a failure. What difference have I made to anyone’s life?” Fortunately, salvation came in the little connectedness he experienced with Ndugu, a six-year old orphan boy in faraway Tanzania whom he had sponsored after retirement. The picture the boy sends him connecting himself with Schmidt with a string moved Schmidt to tears – tears of joy as well as regret, expressing a gamut of emotions. The movie ends with that poignant picture of Schmidt’s face in close-up.

What all this tells us is that how we live the first half of our life matters in terms of a happy ending. Among the things that contributes most to a happy conclusion are close relationships one has cultivated, and the contributions one has made to the wellbeing of others. As psychologist George Vaillant summed up the conclusions of the longest running study of human development, “*Happiness is love. Full stop.*” Vaillant’s conclusions were corroborated by Robert Waldinger, the current Director of the study: “*The good Life – Health and Happiness – is built on good relationships. Period.*”

A midlife review in terms of how the above dynamics feature in our lives gives us still time, before it is too late, to make some changes in our lifestyle and priorities so that our end of life reminiscences lead to a sense of satisfaction– to feeling “this has been a good life” rather than to a sense of despair, “what a waste!”

For introspection:

- *As you look back over your life, how do you feel about it?*
- *What is the invitation you hear as to the changes you may need to make to achieve integrity - seeing your life as meaningful and worthwhile, “to look back over life without regrets and to look forward to death without fear.”?*

Prayer

The mystic Hildegard of Bingen writes: “*The greatest problem lies in trying to integrate everything, to invest all with meaning, see it all as part of a larger, more meaningful life.*”

We can ask God’s help and guidance to achieve this integrity, this meaningfulness. Our God who is very much interested in our wellbeing, our health and happiness is with us in the here and now, as God has been present in all that has been happening in our life. Take a few minutes to tell God how we feel about our life at the moment, and ask for inspiration to make it more meaningful and satisfying.

Have a pleasant weekend. Be safe. Be blessed.
Thank you for listening/reading.

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